

The New Anti-Catholicism

The Last Acceptable Prejudice

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Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	vii
1	Limits of Hatred	1
2	The Catholic Menace	23
3	Catholics and Liberals	47
4	The Church Hates Women	67
5	The Church Kills Gays	93
6	Catholics and the News Media	113
7	“The Perp Walk of Sacramental Perverts”: The Pedophile Priest Crisis	133
8	Catholics in Movies and Television	157
9	Black Legends: Rewriting Catholic History	177
10	The End of Prejudice?	207
	<i>Notes</i>	217
	<i>Index</i>	249

1

Limits of Hatred

Depressing thought: every conformist group has its own equivalent of the scourge of anti-Semitism, a scourge inflicted on any minority it dare not understand for fear of having to think things through. Your “Jew” (your “slacker,” your spoilsport, your inconvenient non-booster) is whoever distracts you from your television set. Or who asks “why” instead of “how.” Catholic-baiting is the anti-Semitism of the liberals.

— Peter Viereck

Catholics and Catholicism are at the receiving end of a great deal of startling vituperation in contemporary America, although generally, those responsible never think of themselves as bigots. Examples are far too easy to find. Recently, the notionally secular *New Republic* published an article on the wartime role of the papacy, in which Pope Pius XII was charged with directly serving the Antichrist. Somewhat less apocalyptically, writing in *The Nation*, dramatist Tony Kushner dismissed Pope John Paul II as a “homicidal liar” who “endorses murder.” Catholic bishops, meanwhile, are, to Kushner, “mitred, chasubled and coped Pilates.” Responding to a papal appeal about the need to revive civil discourse, Kushner wrote that he would first request the Pope not to “beat my

brains out with a pistol butt and leave me to die by the side of the road.” In 2002, the furor over child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy provoked a public outpouring of anti-Church and anti-Catholic vituperation on a scale not witnessed in this country since the 1920s. Reasonable and justified critiques of misconduct by particular Church authorities segued effortlessly into grotesque attacks on the Catholic Church as an institution, together with sweeping denunciations of Catholic faith and practice. Large sections of the media assumed that most Catholic clergy were by definition child molesters, who should be viewed as guilty until proven innocent.¹

Responding to such attacks draws forth still plainer examples of raw anti-Catholic sentiment. Not long ago, *Sister Mary Explains It All*, a televised version of Christopher Durang’s play, was attacked as grossly anti-Catholic. Whether or not the charge was fair, the response of the film’s director certainly seemed to fit that characterization, since he claimed that “any institution that backed the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Roman position on the Holocaust deserves to be the butt of a couple of jokes.” The accuracy or relevance of each of those historical references is open to massive debate, but the director was citing them as if they somehow represented the authentic face of Catholicism. Each term—*Inquisition*, *Crusade*, *Holocaust*—is powerfully evocative, so that a suggestion that any group might share guilt for these acts is very damning. A writer in *Slate* magazine effectively blamed Catholics themselves for any stigma they suffer: “If anti-Catholic bigotry exists in America, it might have something to do with the Catholic Church’s past conduct. Just this weekend, His Holiness John Paul II conceded as much when he finally got around to apologizing to the world for 2000 years of Catholic wickedness. He apologized for the forced conversions, for the murderous Crusades, and for the Inquisition.” The author compared the Pope to “hate-mongers” like Louis Farrakhan.²

None of these remarks is terribly unusual in contemporary discussions of religion. What is striking about these comments is not any individual phrase or accusation, but the completely casual way in which these views are stated, as if any normal person should be expected to share these beliefs. Responding to criticisms of his attack on the Church, Kushner himself wrote, apparently seriously, “I can’t help feeling stung at being labeled anti-Catholic.” Complaints about anti-Catholicism are likely to provoke countercharges of oversensitivity, much as complaints about racism or anti-Semitism did in bygone generations. As Andrew Greeley writes, anti-Catholicism is so insidious “precisely because it is not acknowledged, not recognized, not explicitly and self-consciously rejected.”³ The attitudes are so ingrained as to be invisible.

Even more outrageous than verbal remarks have been protests and demonstrations directed against Catholic institutions. Two notorious examples involved protests in venerated churches. In 1989, several thousand protesters led by the AIDS activist group ACT UP demonstrated during a mass at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. A hundred and thirty protesters demonstrated in the church itself, stopping mass and forcing Cardinal John O'Connor to abandon his sermon. O'Connor was loudly denounced as a "bigot" and a "murderer." Demonstrators fell down in the aisles to simulate death, while condoms were thrown. Among the slogans chanted by protesters were "You say, don't fuck; we say, fuck you!" and "Stop killing us! Stop killing us! We're not going to take it anymore!" Placards read "The Cardinal lies to his parishioners." Most harrowing from a Catholic perspective, one protester grabbed a communion wafer—to a believer, literally the body of Christ—and threw it to the floor. One enthusiastic supporter of the demonstration boasted that the action "violated sacred space, transgressed sacred ritual and offended sensibilities."⁴

In 2000, a similar outbreak occurred in Montreal, when twenty ski-masked members of a Feminist Autonomous Collective interrupted a mass in the Catholic cathedral of Marie, Reine du Monde. They spray-painted on the church "Religion—A Trap for Fools," sprayed atheist and anarchist graffiti on the altar, and tried unsuccessfully to overturn the tabernacle, which contains the sacred Host. Demonstrators stuck used sanitary napkins on pictures and walls, threw condoms around the sanctuary, and shouted pro-abortion slogans. They also destroyed or removed hundreds of hymnbooks or missals.⁵

Quite as remarkable as the events themselves was the coverage they received in the media, and the general lack of outrage. One would have thought that the element of book burning in the Canadian incident should have aroused powerful memories of religious hatred in bygone eras. Yet remarkably few U.S. or even Canadian newspapers so much as reported this event. Both stories, moreover, have rather faded from popular memory in a way they would not have done if other religious or racial groups had been targeted. Imagine, for instance, that a group wishing to protest the actions of the state of Israel had occupied or desecrated an American synagogue, particularly during some time of special holiness such as Yom Kippur. The act would unquestionably have been described by the familiar label of "hate crime," and the activists' political motivation would not have saved them from widespread condemnation. Depending on the scale of the violence, the political content of the act might even push it into the category of terrorism. The synagogue attack

would be cited for years after as an example of the evils of religious hatred and bigotry, in marked contrast to the near oblivion that has befallen the anti-Catholic protests. This kind of analogy helps explain why Jewish organizations have been so notably sensitive to incidents like the St. Patrick's affair, far more so than the secular media.

We can draw parallels with a 1996 incident in which employees of a Denver radio station stormed into a mosque, playing the national anthem on bugle and trumpet. Public outcry was enormous, and thousands of citizens gathered to protest the attack; the story gained media attention both nationally and globally. The radio station issued a groveling apology and agreed to provide "sensitivity training" for its personnel, as well as offering reparations to local Muslims. Yet this moronic prank was probably less traumatic than the cathedral attacks, since it did not include the same kind of highly targeted assaults on venerated objects as did the Catholic incidents. (While Muslims have no less sense of the sacred, they do not share Catholic sensibilities about the sanctity of consecrated places of worship.)⁶

| **The Thinking Man's Anti-Semitism**

Almost as troubling as the sheer abundance of anti-Catholic rhetoric is the failure to acknowledge it as a serious social problem. In the media, Catholicism is regarded as a perfectly legitimate target, the butt of harsh satire in numerous films and television programs that attack Catholic opinions, doctrines, and individual leaders. Arguably, such depictions are legitimate expressions of free speech and stand within America's long tradition of quite savage satire, but the same tolerance of abuse does not apply when other targets are involved. It would be interesting to take a satirical or comic treatment featuring, say, the Virgin Mary or Pope John Paul II and imagine the reaction if a similar gross disrespect was applied, say, to the image of Martin Luther King Jr or of Matthew Shepard, the gay college student murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. What sometimes seems to be limitless social tolerance in modern America has strict limits where the Catholic Church is concerned.

Since the 1950s, changing cultural sensibilities have made it ever more difficult to recite once-familiar American stereotypes about the great majority of ethnic or religious groups, while issues of gender and sexual orientation are also treated with great sensitivity. At least in public discourse, a general sensitivity is required, so that a statement that could be regarded as misogynistic, anti-Semitic, or homophobic would haunt a speaker for years, and could conceivably destroy a public career. Yet there is one massive exception to this rule, namely, that it is still possible to

make quite remarkably hostile or vituperative public statements about one major religious tradition, namely, Roman Catholicism, and those comments will do no harm to the speaker's reputation. No one expects that outrageous statements or acts should receive any significant response, that (for example) performances of Kushner's *Angels in America* should be picketed.

Assessing the scale or seriousness of any kind of prejudice is extraordinarily difficult, but Peter Viereck described "Catholic-baiting" as "the anti-Semitism of the liberals," a phrase that sometimes appears as "the thinking man's anti-Semitism."⁷ At first sight, this analogy seems unnecessarily provocative. It invites the obvious question of whether anti-Catholicism been responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people in the same way that anti-Jewish prejudice undeniably has. The Nazis murdered millions of Catholics in Poland and elsewhere, but in the vast majority of cases, they acted on the grounds of their victims' nationality or politics rather than their religion. And while Communist regimes in Europe and East Asia murdered and tortured millions of Catholic believers, the persecutions did not come close to the kind of near annihilation that Jews suffered in the Holocaust. Is the anti-Semitic analogy not hyperbolic and incendiary?⁸

Obviously, I am drawing no comparison between modern American cultural phenomena and the exterminationist anti-Semitism of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. Still, a quite proper analogy can be drawn between the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism within the United States itself. Let us compare like with like. In some periods, American anti-Semitism has been rampant, and even violent, but religious prejudice in the United States has been directed at least as often against Catholics as against Jews, and anti-Catholic vitriol has more frequently been central to party politics. Viewed against the broad context of American history, the intensity of anti-Jewish hatred in American life during the 1930s and 1940s looks anomalous, an odd departure from the customary cultural themes. Past and present, analogies between the two "antis" are closer than we might think. Yet while anti-Semitism is all but universally condemned, anti-Catholicism is widely tolerated.

| **Anti-ism**

In one crucial area, anti-Catholicism is different from other prejudices, and this difference is commonly used to justify the kinds of remarks and displays described. While a hostile comment about Jews or blacks is directed at a community, an attack on Catholicism is often targeted at an institution, and it is usually considered legitimate to attack an institu-

tion. Someone who speaks of “the evil Catholic Church” can defend this view as a comment on the leadership and policies of the institution without necessarily denouncing ordinary Catholic people. That phrase cannot immediately be cited as bigotry in tandem with a slur on “the evil Jewish community” or “America’s evil black population.” From this point of view, the proper parallel for an attack on the Catholic Church would be (say) with a denunciation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Since this would not of itself constitute bigotry, neither should an attack on the Catholic Church. This distinction between institution and community also helps explain the relative lack of social reaction to anti-Catholic venom. As Andrew Greeley writes, “The reason that most Catholics are not concerned about anti-Catholicism is that they are not hurting.”⁹

Yet this distinction between institution and people is a very weak defense. Unlike those other instances, the institution of the Church is fundamental to the Catholic religion, and it is disingenuous to pretend otherwise. The NAACP is simply not central to black cultural identity in the way that the Church defines Catholicism. The Pope may be the institutional head of a gigantic political and corporate entity, but for hundreds of millions of people, he is also a living symbol of their faith. Moreover, if the Catholic Church as an institution is so wicked, so homicidal, what does that say about the people who believe deeply in it, for whom it provides the vital organizing principle of their lives, the basis of their social identity? Anti-Church sentiment leads naturally to contempt for practicing or believing Catholics, whose faith must reflect emotional weakness, internal repression, or unnatural subservience to authority. The *National Lampoon* once featured a parody of multiple-choice exams, in which one question read “Only a very ___ person believes in Catholicism.” There were four possible answers, *a* through *d*, all of which offered the same word to fill in the gap: *stupid*.

At the outset, we need a reliable definition of what is meant by the term “anti-Catholic.” Obviously, not every statement attacking a Catholic doctrine or stance is ipso facto a form of bigotry. Not even the most extreme Catholic traditionalist believes that everything the institutional Church does is beyond debate, still less the acts and words of every individual Church leader. Traditionalists themselves are likely to have very hostile words for recent Church policies, and for particular bishops or cardinals. In Boston in 2002, the scandal over sexual abuse by clergy provoked savage criticism of the city’s Catholic leader, Cardinal Bernard F. Law, as conservatives and liberals vied with each other to show the greater zeal in demanding his resignation. Even when the Catholic Church

was much less liberal than it is today, Catholic writers freely acknowledged that throughout history, particular priests, bishops, and even popes had committed terrible blunders or outright crimes. Catholics have never claimed a privilege against self-criticism.

Of its nature, the Catholic Church is also more exposed to criticism because of the breadth of outlook that in other respects is one of its proudest boasts. Far more than most churches or denominations, Catholicism offers a comprehensive social vision, and claims the right to speak authoritatively on any and all issues affecting the human condition. In a more secular modern world, though, that ambitious position means potentially treading on a great many toes. The Catholic stance is a continuing affront to upholders of the powerful contemporary idea that religion is fine so long as it is held privately, on an individualistic basis.¹⁰

Many people strenuously oppose the positions taken by the Catholic Church on social and political issues without needing to attack that religion as such or wishing to insult its theology. Abortion, contraception, genetic research, school vouchers, marriage annulments—all are issues on which the Church has positions that are unpopular with substantial sections of the American people. Some of these ideas also provoke strenuous dissent within the Catholic community itself, where a growing number of believers classify themselves as members of a loyal opposition. Within the Church, and passionately committed to its interests, there are Catholics who dissent from official teachings on such key issues as contraception, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and clerical celibacy. It is not anti-Catholic simply to assert that the Church's position on a given issue is dead wrong, nor that Bishop X or Cardinal Y is a monster or a menace to the public good. Just because a given Catholic group is offended by a particular cause or policy stance does not automatically place that idea within the realm of bigotry. This was the position taken by William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, who is quick to take umbrage at perceived slurs against the Church. Responding to the media coverage of the clergy abuse scandals, though, he wrote, "There's nothing biased about hanging the dirty laundry of an institution out for the public to see. People who love the Church want to get rid of the problem, and the way to get rid of the problem is to be informed." When confronted with a problem of this gravity, the most effective way to damage Catholic interests would be to withhold or suppress legitimate criticism. This would also be the position of the liberal reformist group Voice of the Faithful, formed in direct response to the abuse crisis in New England.¹¹

We also need to recognize that the charge of anti-Catholicism is as

open to misuse as any other accusation of bias or bigotry. To take a hypothetical example, imagine a Catholic diocese that has been repeatedly affected by scandals involving sexual or financial fraud, and in which it is clear that a bishop has simply ignored the persistent problems around him. If the local news media were to expose the abuses and demand reform, it is conceivable that diocesan authorities would argue that their critics were anti-Catholic, and such an argument would have carried a great deal of weight in most periods prior to, say, the 1980s. The regularity with which Church authorities played this card in bygone days helps explain modern skepticism about the whole notion of anti-Catholicism.

So when does a statement or act plausibly make the transition from criticism to bigotry, to “anti-ism”? Once again, we can see a useful parallel in the concept of anti-Semitism. Nobody would complain if a news outlet accurately reported the criminal activities of an individual who was Jewish. On the other hand, most observers would complain bitterly if the media outlet in question proposed that this form of criminality was peculiarly characteristic of Jews or arose from features of Jewish religion or ethnicity. It would be still worse to report a given crime or misdeed alongside real or imaginary instances of Jewish misdeeds through the centuries, implying that “this is what Jews do, this is what they are like.” That would be frank anti-Semitism.

To take another Jewish example, criticisms of the state or government of Israel are not of themselves anti-Semitic, even if they allege wide-ranging crimes or misdeeds by that nation. Human infallibility is a concept unknown to Judaism, and even a Jewish nation can err badly, as can specific leaders. Many Jews are severely critical of Israeli politicians such as Ariel Sharon or Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet over the last few years, especially in Europe, criticisms of Israel have tended to develop into quite vicious anti-Semitic attacks, deploying the full range of traditional stereotypes. This is particularly true in visual displays, in which the Star of David is juxtaposed with swastikas or shown symbolically dominating the world. However justified anti-Israel criticisms may be on specific occasions, this rhetoric can serve as a highly sensitive detonator for anti-Semitism. Again, the core argument is that this is the sort of thing that Jews can be expected to do.

If we generalize these principles, we can say that is quite legitimate to attack an individual or an institution, even if these are religious in nature. It is a quite different matter to say that some essential features of that religion give rise to evil or abuse and that the evil cannot be prevented without fundamentally changing the beliefs or practices of the religion. It is not anti-Catholic to remark that Bishop A or Cardinal B is

dishonest or criminal. It is more questionable to describe these actions as characteristic of a large body of Catholics or to claim that the behavior arises from ideas and practices fundamental to Catholicism.

Perhaps some religious or political systems are so aberrant in their very nature that they do inevitably produce evil consequences. Most of us would happily concur with this view of Nazism, say, and would have no problem in accepting the overarching label “anti-Nazi.” But very few would argue overtly that a whole religion is evil in the same way. With few exceptions—such as a handful of notoriously violent cults—religions are usually held to be worthy of respect by outsiders. Condemning a whole religion is commonly, and reasonably, perceived as bigotry. This reluctance to stigmatize religious traditions was evident following the appalling terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, when political leaders, the mass media, and civil liberties groups allied to resist attacks on Islam. Any public remark suggesting that Islam was intrinsically connected with violence and terrorism was deemed racist, prejudiced, and unacceptable, while sporadic assaults on Muslim institutions met with widespread condemnation. As with anti-Semitism, public opinion was expected to reject any attempt to denounce a religion on the grounds of the misdeeds of some of its members. Commonly, this kind of bigotry is seen as a fundamental betrayal of American values.

This campaign in the name of tolerance is remarkable when set next to the blanket denunciations all too often visited upon Catholicism. Ironically, the September massacres resulted in some remarkable tirades not against the religion of Islam but against Catholicism, though the actual Catholic linkage to the attacks was nonexistent. In the *New York Press*, Michelangelo Signorile somehow used Islamist fanatic Osama bin Laden as a means of denouncing “the gay-bashing Pope.” John Paul, too, was “another omnipotent religious zealot, one who equally condemns us Western sinners and incites violence with his incendiary rhetoric. . . . Christian fundamentalist extraordinaire and a man who inspires thugs across the globe who commit hate crimes against homosexuals, a form of terrorism if ever there was one.” Signorile later included the Catholic cardinals among the religious right who constituted “the real American Taliban.” Writing in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Kimberly Blaker noted, “The irony is that the Islamic terrorists responsible for the September 11 fatalities are merely clones of America’s own Christian Right extremists, sheathed in a different religion.” She made it clear that she considered the Catholic Church the heart of the lunatic “religious right.” It is difficult to know how to characterize these views except in terms of rank anti-Catholicism.¹²

The problem of differential sensitivity is also illustrated by another post-September 11 episode that occurred in a high school in Sharon, Massachusetts. As the school prepared for its 2001 Halloween celebration, teachers were instructed to watch carefully for any costumes that might indicate anti-Arab or anti-Muslim sentiment. Fortunately, no such issues arose, allowing the teachers to relax and enjoy the event. A panel of teachers then gave the “most comical costume” award to a group of three boys, two of whom were dressed as pregnant nuns, the third as their priest and impregnator. The fact that high schoolers can behave obnoxiously need surprise nobody, but what is amazing about this affair is that no adult thought that the display might conceivably be taken as offensive or bigoted.¹³

| Shades of Bigotry

Most of the examples of anti-Church sentiment discussed here can be categorized as anti-Catholicism, but in some instances, we should rather be speaking of anti-clericalism. This is a useful concept, though it requires some explanation. The word *anti-clericalism* is vastly better known in Continental Europe and Latin America than it is in the United States. When the word appears in U.S. periodicals, it is generally in the context of the history or contemporary politics of Latin nations.¹⁴ Because of the very different historical heritage of these lands, clergy have traditionally occupied a privileged place in the social and political order, which makes them primary targets of popular discontent. Over the centuries, a body of stereotypes developed to characterize what clergy are generally supposed to be like. Anti-clerical imagery normally included a common package of images and insults, familiar to anyone who has ever read Geoffrey Chaucer’s accounts of medieval English society. In this view, priests, monks, and friars are idle, greedy, lascivious, and hypocritical. With a handful of saintly exceptions, popes and bishops not only demonstrate these same faults, but compound them with sins of power such as greed, despotism, and megalomania. In the anti-clerical view, the clergy are not just wicked in themselves, but the enemies of public welfare and of social progress.

It is commonly secularists or socialists who express the most violent anti-clerical views, but often the same opinions can be heard from people who would happily describe themselves as Catholics, lay believers who are deeply unhappy with what they perceive as the abuses of the clergy. Although the Catholic Church has never enjoyed a legally established status in the United States, there have always been anti-clericals. Anti-clericalism is usually associated with churches that enjoy an official established relationship with the state, but it would be difficult to con-

vince most residents of large American cities that the Catholic Church did not possess such a quasi-established status through most of the twentieth century. Catholics, in other words, can be fervent critics of their church and can be strongly anti-clerical.

These distinctions are helpful when understanding a theme that surfaces repeatedly during controversies over writings or artworks that at least some Catholics deem offensive, namely, that the artists or writers under attack objects are themselves Catholics. For many readers observing these cultural battles, the argument sounds convincing, especially when they apply analogies from other religions. It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which, say, a Jew might be described as anti-Semitic, so how can a Catholic be guilty of Catholic-bashing? On the surface, the idea seems absurd. Critics who cry “anti-Catholicism” must therefore be oversensitive and enemies of free expression: they must be demonstrating the familiar Catholic tendency toward repression and intolerance. To the contrary, I will suggest that the religious background of the offending artist certainly does not absolve a work of bigotry or bitter anti-Church animus, although we need to be careful whether we label an attitude as anti-Catholic or anti-clerical.

The argument that “Catholics can’t be anti-Catholic” has been a staple of recent cultural controversies. It was heard, for instance, during the 2001 contretemps over Renee Cox’s display at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The artist portrayed herself, nude, in the role of Jesus during the Last Supper, to the horror of conservative critics such as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Catholic activist William Donohue. To deflate such attacks, *Salon* magazine responded, “Unfortunately for Donahue [*sic*] and Giuliani, Cox isn’t guilty of prejudice (she’s a lapsed Catholic herself, after all).” As Cox herself remarked, “I don’t know what they’re talking about, anti-Catholic. I grew up Catholic and I feel that as a Catholic and having been put through that, I have the right to critique it.” A similar defense was heard when artist Andres Serrano displayed his “Piss Christ,” a photograph of a crucifix submerged in a jar of his own urine. Though the work was attacked as clearly blasphemous, Serrano’s defenders stressed that he was an ex-Catholic who was exploring Catholic symbolism. Commenting on such rows, art critic Eleanor Heartney stresses that “the religious right’s favorite examples of ‘secular humanist culture’ were raised as Catholics.”¹⁵

I have had a personal encounter with this kind of defense. In 2001, my book *Hidden Gospels* criticized radical New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan for a political agenda that I described as, in some measure, anti-Catholic. A journalistic account of this controversy dismissed

any suggestions of anti-Church polemic on the part of “Mr. Crossan, Irish by birth and a former Roman Catholic priest.” The journalist clearly thought that this was a knockdown argument: a former priest cannot be anti-Catholic, least of all if he is Irish.¹⁶

In fact, several critical elements separate the hypothetical instances of the anti-Jewish Jew and the anti-Catholic Catholic. One obvious difference is that Catholicism is an intellectual or emotional stance rather than a matter of genes or skin color, so that it is quite possible for a person to abandon Catholicism, and even to loathe everything associated with that heritage. As Shakespeare remarked, “Heresies that men do leave / Are hated most of those they did deceive.” And when people leave religions, especially faiths that demand a great deal of emotional investment, they are all the more likely to revile them as pernicious “heresies.” Through the centuries, defectors from particular religions have distinguished themselves by their fanatical zeal against their former friends and colleagues. Once upon a time, there was a monk named Martin Luther. During penal times in early modern England, when the very act of saying the Catholic mass was a capital offense, the most dedicated and ruthless priest hunters were themselves recent defectors from the Church, who could usually count a good number of Catholics in their immediate family circle. Literally, in some instances, brother hunted brother.¹⁷ Adolf Hitler himself offers a prime example of an ex-Catholic turned violent anti-Catholic bigot, one whose hatred of Catholicism led him to an even more comprehensively anti-Christian stance. Of course someone raised Catholic can be anti-Catholic.

| Catholics Against the Church?

We are on quite different ground when the person accused of attacking a faith still claims to be loyal to that tradition. But such an individual can certainly be viscerally anti-clerical, accepting the range of prejudices that characterize that lively tradition, and therefore unwilling to see anything but ill in the Catholic Church or its representatives. The concept of anti-clericalism is particularly important in the United States because it reflects a potent strand of American Protestant culture, with roots in colonial times. Americans have often shown themselves resentful of clergy and of clerical attempts to influence politics, and the most successful religious movements have often been those that entrusted most power to the laity. In modern times, we think of the booming self-help and recovery movements that so conspicuously lack any kind of clerical involvement. Anti-clerical attacks find a real resonance in the social mainstream, as well as in Catholic circles.

But can people who describe themselves as loyally Catholic go beyond mere anti-clericalism, to be guilty of outright anti-Catholicism or “Catholic-bashing”? This is a sensitive issue in debates within the Church, since conservative and traditionalist groups sometimes level this charge at their liberal opponents. The most visible activist group is the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which has sought quite successfully to establish itself as a Catholic counterpart of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League. Whenever a public figure makes an anti-Catholic statement, the Catholic League protests strenuously. Some of the league’s main targets, however, are avowedly Catholic, including feminist groups such as Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC).

In consequence, liberal Catholics themselves have attacked the league’s whole view that “anti-Catholicism” constitutes a pressing social problem. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has written that “the mantra of ‘anti-Catholicism’ from the Catholic Right is primarily a reflection of this internal Catholic conflict. This term is being used by the Catholic Right to claim that they and they alone are ‘authentic’ Catholics, and Catholics that hold progressive views are not Catholics, are hostile to ‘authentic’ Catholicism, and hence are ‘anti-Catholic.’ Furthermore, non-Catholics in the larger society who listen respectfully to the views of progressive Catholics are therefore also ‘anti-Catholic.’ In short, the charge of ‘anti-Catholicism’ is being used as a scare tactic by the Catholic Right in the service of repression of progressive Catholic views.” CFFC leader Frances Kissling remarks that “for ultra-conservative Catholic groups to claim that any criticism of the Catholic Church is Catholic-bashing is part of the game.” Writing in the *Village Voice*, Frank Owen presents a similarly hostile view to complaints of “anti-Catholicism”: “it’s hardly a coincidence that the examples of so-called anti-Catholic culture that most upset activists like Donohue ... were perpetrated not by outsiders but by Catholics, or former Catholics. ... Which suggests that what’s actually going on here is a heated debate over Catholic identity—a nasty civil war of ideas among conservatives and liberals, hard-line literalists and relativist semi-believers, about who is a genuine Catholic and who isn’t.”¹⁸

Given our modern historical memories of oppressive states and party systems, we have to be very careful about describing loyal critics of any system as outsiders, still less enemies. Depending on the individual case, we might see the person as drawing on anti-clerical ideas while remaining within the broader Church tradition. Throughout history, the Catholic Church has known a wide variety of opinions on quite fundamental matters of faith and practice, including papal authority, clerical celibacy,

and the powers of the priesthood. One of the boasts of Catholicism through the centuries is its ability to accept the principle of development: it is always a work in progress. Let us imagine the hypothetical example of a Catholic reformer in the 1940s, say, who criticized many aspects of Catholic worship and liturgy, and advocated extensive reform. At the time, that view might be dismissed as fundamentally anti-Catholic, yet those ideas would be vindicated by the reforms of the 1960s. Far from being anti-Catholic, the reformer might today be regarded as a prophetic voice within the Church. Contemporary advocates of women's ordination or greater lay participation in Church structures assuredly believe that, in the same way, history will absolve them, too.

Yet on occasion, in any institution, internal criticism can become so hostile as to move far beyond the notion of loyal opposition. To return to the Jewish parallel, we might imagine a ludicrous example of someone speaking as a Jew and demanding basic reforms within that religion, including the abandonment of the scriptures, circumcision, the Sabbath, and dietary laws; in addition, Jews should apologize for wrongs done by them over the centuries. Even though claimed as a reform of the religion, most observers would see this critique as simply anti-Jewish and wonder how the speaker could possibly claim any loyalty to Judaism whatever. If the hyperreformer launched intemperate denunciations of every Jew who opposed his dreams, we might not be speaking of true racial anti-Semitism, but we would certainly be dealing with frank anti-Judaism.

Within Catholicism, likewise, some attacks on established doctrine are just as sweeping as this notional example. In his popular recent book, *Constantine's Sword*, James Carroll offers his agenda for the purification of a Catholic Church allegedly suffused in anti-Semitism. Among other things, he rejects virtually the whole of Christian theology, including atonement, "the inhuman idea that anyone's death can be the fulfillment of a plan of God's," and the concept of salvation. ("The coming of Jesus was for the purpose of revelation, not salvation—revelation, that is, that we are already saved.") He declares that any "Christian proclamation that says that redemption, grace, perfection, whatever you call it, has already come is unbelievable on its face." The structures of the Church are fatally flawed, and a future Vatican Council would abolish papal supremacy and eliminate the clergy as a separate caste: bishops would be elected.¹⁹

By any customary standard, a Catholic Church without Christ, without salvation, or without a clerical structure, would cease to be Catholic, and could scarcely be described as Christian. As the Catholic League's Robert Lockwood observes, "Rather clearly, the objective solution Carroll has in mind already exists: Unitarianism."²⁰ Yet for Carroll, fail-

ure to institute these “reforms” would mean not only that the Church was in theological and historical error, but that it was irredeemably tied to anti-Semitism and the massacre of Jews through the centuries. The main purpose of this reformed “Catholic” Church would be to live in a constant state of apology and penitence for the dreadful crimes it had committed. For Carroll, the Church is founded upon hatred and is in every sense a hateful institution.

If a contemporary writer advocates a total change in the nature of the religion and blames it for such appalling crimes, then it is difficult to see why he or she would continue to use the Catholic label. If that same person uses harsh, sweeping, and vindictive language to denounce the Church for failing to live up to an idiosyncratic notion of Catholicism, then it is reasonable to call that an anti-Catholic attack. While we have to be very cautious in applying the anti-Catholic label to self-described Catholics, on occasion the term is applicable.

| **Hate Speech**

In commenting on the ferocious attacks to which Catholics and their beliefs are subjected, I am not objecting to the fact that controversialists use stark or intemperate language. Political and religious debate over the last few decades has become anemic compared with that of previous centuries, when writers almost casually classified their opponents as the spawn of Satan. Martin Luther, one of the great heroes of European history, was a master of this slash-and-burn theory of theological debate. There is nothing wrong with polemic as such. The argument of this book is not so much that Catholicism is subjected to unjust abuse, but that it is virtually the only major institution with which such liberties are still permitted.

Just how sensitive many people have become about any kind of attacks on racial or religious groups is demonstrated by some of the legal attempts over the last two decades to regulate so-called hate speech. American courts have never accepted that speech should be wholly unrestricted, since some words might provoke dangerous or violent consequences; courts have thus upheld laws regulating “fighting words.” During the 1980s, though, a variety of activists pressed for expanded laws or administrative codes that would limit or suppress speech directed against particular groups, against women, racial minorities, and homosexuals. The most ambitious, and worrying, of these speech codes were implemented on college campuses. Usually, these codes encountered heavy criticism from libertarians, as well as from the political Right, which viewed them as gross manifestations of political correctness. Most codes have since been struck down by the federal courts on

grounds of overbreadth: in order to achieve desirable social goals, states and particularly colleges were infringing severely on permissible public discourse and on First Amendment rights. Even so, those who originally advocated speech codes remained unrepentant and attacked the courts for their alleged failure to protect minorities. A substantial section of liberal and radical opinion not only favors limiting the right to criticize minorities and other interest groups, but believes that this regulation should be enforced by stringent legislation.²¹

The relevance of these debates to the anti-Catholicism issue is obvious when we look at the language of some of these recent codes. If these provisions had been upheld in the courts, what would they have meant for recent Catholic controversies? One typical university code defines hate speech “as any verbal speech, harassment, and/or printed statements which can provoke mental and/or emotional anguish for any member of the . . . University community.” Nothing in the code demands evidence that the offended person is a normal, average character not oversensitive to insult. According to the speech codes, the fact of “causing anguish” is sufficient. Since the various codes placed so much emphasis on the likelihood of causing offense, rather than the intent of the act or speech involved, the codes might well have criminalized artworks such as Serrano’s “Piss Christ.”²²

The element of “causing offense” is generally central to speech codes. At the University of Michigan, a bellwether for the academic world, a proposed code would have prohibited “any behavior, verbal or physical, that stigmatizes or victimizes an individual on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, creed, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, handicap, or Vietnam-era veteran status.” “Stigmatization and victimization” are defined less by any objective criteria than by the subjective feelings of the individuals or groups who felt threatened. Though this criterion is not spelled out, these codes imply that the targets of harassment should be groups who have at some point experienced discrimination or violence, so that it would still be legitimate to denounce powerful categories such as the rich or corporate executives. In terms of American history, the obvious categories to be protected on the basis of past discrimination would include blacks, Jews, homosexuals, Native Americans—and, logically, Catholics.²³

Although these speech codes are probably unenforceable, some sweeping “hate” statutes have been sustained. In 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a local bias crime statute that prohibited the display of a symbol that one knows or has reason to know “arouses anger, alarm or resentment in others on the basis of race, color, creed, religion or gender.”

The implied reference is obviously to a swastika or a burning cross, but as it is written, the criterion is that the symbol causes “anger, alarm or resentment” to some unspecified person. There is abundant evidence that these were precisely the reactions of many Catholic believers who saw or read about “Piss Christ” or the controversial displays at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.²⁴

One key justification for hate speech laws is that speech is very difficult to separate from conduct and that creating a hostile climate for a particular group often leads to actual discrimination or violence—for example, to gay-bashing or racist violence.²⁵ When a violent incident occurs, such as the murder of Matthew Shepard, activists seek to link the act to those who had expressed anti-gay opinions over the previous years, or to those who opposed pro-gay-rights legislation. Hateful words have hateful consequences, and the speakers should not escape the blame. Again, there is no obvious reason why Catholics should be exempt from protection on these same grounds. Although they receive next to no media publicity, attacks on Catholic churches and properties do occur quite frequently, often in circumstances that suggest specifically anti-religious intent. In 1999 and 2000, a series of church desecrations in Brooklyn left religious statues decapitated and defaced, and hate mail left no doubt of the sacrilegious intent. If hate speech contributes to hate crime, why should anti-Catholic speech not be regulated?²⁶

In the area of hate crime as much as hate speech, Catholics receive fewer protections than other groups. Many jurisdictions have hate crime laws, which usually carry severe penalties. On the surface, there seems no reason why such laws should not have been invoked in response to the outrageous demonstrations at the Catholic cathedrals in New York City and Montreal, or the Brooklyn church desecrations. In practice though, we rarely hear suggestions that hate crime laws should be invoked in such cases. When Montreal’s cathedral was attacked, Quebec police announced that the province’s stringent hate crime law would not be invoked against people who “in good faith” attempt “to establish by argument an opinion on a religious subject.”²⁷ Nor were hate crime laws invoked in the Brooklyn case, in which the perpetrator received five years of probation with no jail time. Legally, though, it is all but impossible to define hate crime or hate speech without including these acts, or many others at which Catholics have taken offense. Why are Catholics not judged worthy of protection under these laws?

I am not arguing for the extension of hate speech codes or hate crime laws, which, in my view, are already far too wide-ranging and ill-defined. But the highly selective nature of such regulations amply illustrates the

common failure to treat the large and pervasive phenomenon of anti-Catholicism as an authentic social problem.

| **The Catholic Problem**

For many people in the United States—particularly for opinion-makers in the mass media and in the academic world—Catholicism neither needs nor deserves the kind of protections that apply to other religious traditions. To the contrary, many observers hold the view that Catholicism, and specifically the organized Church, is itself a problem, a major opponent of social progress. In this assessment, the Church is a haven of reaction, especially on matters of gender and sexuality, and it deserves little sympathy when it is attacked because, frankly, it is so dependably on the wrong side.

One goal of this book is to describe just how this notion of Catholicism-as-problem developed, especially over the last thirty years or so. We must distinguish between the general historical fact of anti-Catholicism and its current manifestations. Anti-Catholicism as such has a very long pedigree in North America. Indeed, the idea predates the creation of the United States, and much of the country's social and political development in the nineteenth century would have been radically different had this force not existed. To take one example, the whole American party system would likely have developed on very different lines.²⁸

I have spoken of contemporary Catholicism as a social problem not because I personally view the Church as a threat or a menace, but because this religious tradition is so widely viewed in such negative terms. For many activists, Catholicism is indeed a problem to be solved, an obstacle to be overcome. We can learn something here from the large sociological literature on social problems, which are defined not by any intrinsic quality they possess, but by the reactions they inspire in others. If, for instance, most of a society considers witchcraft a pervasive threat, then we can legitimately speak of a witchcraft problem, whether or not we believe that witches really exist. What is it about Catholicism and its enemies that have shaped the “Catholic problem” as it is constructed in the contemporary United States?²⁹

Societies differ dramatically on what themes or issues they rank as social problems, and problems can rise or fall over time. One society might consider homosexuality a major problem, another might focus on sexual harassment, another on alcohol consumption. Forty years ago, homosexuality was generally considered a pressing social problem in America, whereas today, far more people are concerned with the problem of homophobia, or opposition to that same behavior. In trying to understand

these shifts of emphasis, social scientists pay close attention to the changing role of interest groups and how these use new problems to defend and advance their interests. To take an obvious example, a society in which women have substantial political and economic power is likely to be far more concerned about issues such as sexual violence and abuse than one in which women are largely confined to domestic roles. As we will see, the changing shape of anti-Catholicism tells us a great deal about shifting social roles and expectations in American society.

Theorists also study activists and moral entrepreneurs, those individuals and groups who try to formulate social problems, to tell society what it should be most concerned about at any time. Whether these activists succeed depends on how well they shape their messages according to the groups to whom they are seeking to appeal, and how far they can present these messages in convincing terms. Claims makers use a well-established repertoire of techniques to frame these problems in the most broadly appealing way. These rhetorical themes are amply illustrated by the civil rights struggles waged by African-Americans over the last century, in which activists portrayed injustice in terms of symbolic events and individuals, using richly coded words such as lynching, Scottsboro, Selma, and so on. Problems are presented through mythologized narratives that include starkly dichotomized visions of heroes and villains. Decades after the events occurred, debates about race still commonly invoke the names of figures such as Martin Luther King Jr and Bull Connor, just as gay rights rhetoric harks back to the hallowed name of Stonewall. Ironically, in view of the supposed secularization of American society, the most potent narratives are often those that appeal to underlying religious assumptions, that draw on images of martyrdom or crucifixion, of righteous victims and evil Pharisees. Witness the crucifixion imagery in media accounts of the death of Matthew Shepard.

| **Summoning Demons**

Often, a hostile organization or group comes to symbolize not just an agglomeration of individuals, but a cause, an enemy, which is labeled with the worst attributes that can be found in the imagery familiar to that culture. This is the process known as stereotyping or demonization, and it is familiar from America's long history of ethnic and religious conflict. Once such stereotypes are established, they become increasingly detached from this or that specific individual and acquire an enduring cultural reality of their own. As interest groups rise or fall in society, they often identify new enemies, so studying a society's changing folk devils is a valuable tool of social analysis.

Against this background, we can trace how the “Catholic problem” has changed its nature over time. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anti-Catholicism had an obvious class and ethnic appeal, since new ethnic and religious groups represented both an economic and cultural challenge to established groups. Successive activists and agitators could create alarm by warning the native-born how a rising Catholic population could threaten their wealth and their political hegemony. Claims makers employed a well-established common fund of knowledge and stereotypes about Catholic behavior, which drew variously on religious polemic and historical mythology. Popes offered splendid demon figures in this respect, as did conventional nightmare images such as the Inquisition, the seducing priest in the confessional, and the fires in which Catholic states had murdered countless Protestant martyrs over the centuries.

The traumatic changes in American society during the 1960s created a new range of insurgent interest groups, most obviously feminists and gay rights activists. In many areas, these groups found themselves at odds with the Roman Catholic Church, to the extent that they increasingly defined their own ideological positions in opposition to that religious tradition. In seeking to discredit the Church that was their primary political enemy, radicals constructed a new anti-Catholicism that was more relevant to them than the old ideas based on class and ethnicity, and that laid more stress on themes of gender and sexuality. However, the new formulation coincided at many points with the older body of stereotypes that were so ingrained in the public consciousness—inevitably, since these images had circulated for so many years.

Modern anti-Catholicism differs in significant ways from older models. Above all, while the older tradition was primarily nativist, xenophobic, and politically right-wing, the modern distaste for Catholicism is primarily found on the left/liberal side of the spectrum, especially among feminists and gay activists. This liberal coloring has reshaped the tradition in other ways, too. Whereas many earlier critics loathed the Roman Catholic Church for its alleged betrayals of Christian and biblical truth, such an explicitly religious critique is of little interest to modern secular liberals. As we will see, though, some liberal and feminist writings on the early Church do draw on this notion of the Church as the betrayers of the authentic message of Jesus.

And there are other differences. While in earlier eras of intense religious conflict, such as the 1850s or the 1920s, anti-Catholic activists were deeply opposed to mass immigration, modern critics of Catholicism are favorable or neutral on immigration issues. This may seem curious

given the fact that so many of the Latino and Asian migrants who have entered the United States in recent years are Catholic. Contemporary anti-Catholicism is not usually directed against Catholics as individuals or as population groups, however, but rather against the ideas and teachings of the Church. This is important because that makes it much easier for anti-Church activists to appeal to dissident Catholics themselves, who draw on the parallel ideology of anti-clericalism.³⁰ Moreover, the issues of substance in contemporary anti-Catholicism differ greatly from those that troubled previous generations. While traditional anti-Catholic rhetoric addressed issues of national and international politics and alleged threats of Catholic political dominance, the newer concerns are centered on personal and moral dilemmas, issues such as sexual identity, abortion, and contraception. All, of course, have their partisan implications.

Yet having noted all these differences, we can still perceive definite continuities with older ideas, particularly in the stereotypes that emerged during successive controversies. However different the roots of modern anti-Catholic activism, with its liberal and feminist affinities, the imagery would have been broadly familiar to nativist Protestants a century or two ago. In film especially, wicked Catholic clergy look very much like their counterparts in hostile tracts from bygone years, with tyrannical cardinals, homicidal bishops, and depraved priests. Especially in the coverage of child abuse by clergy, the media have presented a panoply of very traditional anti-clerical imagery, attacking clergy as sexually repressed hypocrites. The lesson seems to be that although the political environment may have changed, there is something very powerful, very resonant, in this versatile cultural imagery, which allows it to serve the interests of a remarkable range of constituencies.

The shifting nature of the "Catholic problem" helps explain the very different attitudes that society demonstrates toward this form of religious prejudice, in contrast to other kinds of bigotry that superficially seem so similar. Since the 1960s, American politics has been dominated by issues of identity, conceived in terms of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In conventional argument, racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-ethnic prejudice are all social problems, grave manifestations of a broader social phenomenon that is characterized as "hate" or bigotry. In keeping with other social movements through the centuries, rising groups have tried to express their newfound power through legislative change, notably the prohibition of discrimination and hate speech. As we have seen, anti-Catholicism should logically be categorized together with these other species of "hate," but the political context has ensured

that this particular kind of bias receives quite different treatment. Often, it is not anti-Catholicism that is presented as a glaring social problem, but rather Catholicism itself, the religion of almost a quarter of all Americans. If only because of the sheer numbers involved, anti-Catholicism must be seen as the great unknown “anti-ism” or phobia, the most significant unfronted prejudice in modern America.³¹